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ABSTRACT

Three developments in the field of foreign language education seem to have particularly great potential for foreign language teaching and learning in the 1990s: (1) proficiency; (2) technology; and (3) authenticity (PTA). The first of these developments involves the language proficiency movement's debate over the establishment of a common metric by which foreign language experience and proficiency can be measured. The second development concerns technological advancements computers, satellite communications, fax phones, interactive video, CD-ROM, electronic networks, and artificial intelligence. The developments in technology, however, do not remove the element of human creativity in conceptualizing good research projects and instructional applications. This job is still the teacher's responsibility. Properly used, the new technology can be a valuable adjunct to teaching. The third area of development in foreign language teaching, authenticity, involves the use of printed and electronic materials prepared by native speakers for native speakers. Even in the first week of classes, students can be asked to deal with these materials at a level appropriate to their language skills. Foreign language instruction can also provide information about the world. The use of authentic materials makes this task not only easy, but unavoidable. (DJD)

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The "PTA" of the Future

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As foreign language education enters the 1990's, three developments of the 1980's seem to have particularly great potential for how we teach and, by implication, for how our students will study and learn foreign languages. The three on this list are *proficiency*, *technology*, and *authenticity*.

Proficiency

No discussion of the past decade and and the changing role of the teacher in the future of foreign language education could be considered without the mention of proficiency. When it first appeared, it might have been just a buzzword, like so many others (some of which are still current). Consider, for example, *behavioral objectives, career education, contrastive analysis, infusion, direct method, audiolingualism, global education, communicative competence, functional-notional syllabus, TPR, The Silent Way, Community Language Learning, Suggestopedia, inductive approach, deductive approach, natural approach, interactive approach*, and the list could go on.

But somehow, proficiency seems different. For one thing, when it appeared in public and private foreign language education (the first Foreign Service Institute (FSI) Testing Kit Workshop for non-government personnel was held in 1979 at the State Department in Washington, D.C.), it already had developed something of a pedigree through 25 years of use in the government.

Like all good revolutions, the proficiency movement has sparked much debate. On one side are people saying that the whole concept of proficiency is flawed, that language is too complex a behavior to be measured by some simple sampling technique and some descriptive scale. On the other side are people saying that after 30 years of government use and 10 years of academic interest, with reams and reams of empirical research and data gathering, and after tens of thousands of examinations given and rated, we have a database and a workable measuring tool that can provide us and our students valuable information.

The two sides of the proficiency controversy are even now coming to grips with a reality, that being that a common metric is absolutely necessary. Consider the following illustration:

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> On Sunday, February 7 [1904], at 10:40 a.m., an automatic fire alarm went off in the basement of Baltimore's John E. Hurst wholesale dry-goods warehouse. Within ten minutes an explosion spread the fire to neighboring buildings. Borne by the wind, the flames spread through the central business district. Wooden stables and sheds dotted the alleys between "completely fireproof" buildings of steel-reinforced concrete, stone and brick. Once the fire was out of control, the heat became so intense that masonry structures seemed to burst into spontaneous flames. By 11:40 a.m. the fire department's chief engineer, George W. Horton, sent a telegram to Washington: 'Desperate fire here. Must have help at once.' By 12:47 the first firemen and engines had been loaded onto a special train in Washington and made the trip in almost record time, 38 minutes. Baltimore crowds cheered, but the rescuing firemen soon found that their hoses would not fit the Baltimore hydrants. They wrapped them to the plugs with improvised canvas 'bandages,' but the streams of water were so weak the men had to hold nozzles dangerously close to the flames. Additional engine companies arrived from Philadelphia, New York, Wilmington, and Annapolis. Firefighters for the Pennsylvania railroad made the ten-hour trip from Altoona. There never was any scarcity of water -- the reservoir actually rose two-tenths of an inch during the fire -- but there was no way of getting it to the blaze. Company after company discovered that their hoses would not fith the Baltimore hydrants (*Smithsonian*, March, 1985).

We take standards for granted where we have them (electric current, sockets for light bulbs, film sizes and speeds, the hues of red and green traffic lights, clothing sizes, nuts and bolts); and where we don't have them, we often experience major problems. In the language teaching profession we certainly have our share of problems deciding what "two years of Spanish" means when a student transfers from one school to another or enters college with that language experience on his high school transcript. The debate is not <u>whether</u> we should have a common metric, but rather, <u>what kind</u> we will have and <u>when</u> we'll get it. And it may be that we may have to settle for something less than a perfectly objective metric; but that is not unusual. Consider the Olympics! In some cases the common metric is a stopwatch; in some cases, it's a tape measure; and in some cases, as diving or gymnastics, it's simply the collective and subjective evaluations of a group of respected experts called "judges." The last case is not unlike the situation the ACTFL-ETS proficiency scale's ratings and raters now represent.

Technology

Lest there be any doubt about the impact of technology on education, the *CALICO Journal* lists six or seven educational technology conferences taking place every month. Advances in educational technology are happening faster than most of us can comprehend. This situation is not unusual. In 1948, for example, the founder of IBM reportedly

predicted that as many as *12 companies* might someday have their own computers (John Baer, *Computer Wimp*, p. 8). In 1977, just over a decade ago, the first mass-market personal computers hit the stores: the Apple II, the Commodore PET, and the Radio Shack TRS-80. (Radio Shack took a gamble when they placed their first factory order for 3,500, and were amazed when they took customer orders for 10,000 the *first month*). And as hard as this may be to believe, the first IBM PC didn't appear until 1981 (*Computer Basics* [Time-Life Books], p. 99 & p.104).

From their earliest days in education, computers have naturally been used for tedious drill-and-practice activities where convergent, predictable answers are called for: in math -- addition, subtraction, multiplication; in language -- verb forms, vocabulary building, declension patterns, and so on. Over time, these drill activities have been embellished with sound, images, color, and games.

But applications are becoming more and more sophisticated and imaginative all the time. At Ohio State University, for example, we introduced in 1988 a computer-adaptive placement exam in French and Spanish (developed by and purchased from Brigham Young University) to test over 6,000 incoming freshmen each year. It works like this: a student sits down at a computer. After being prompted for name, social security number, high school attended, and amount of FL study, she begins the test. From a bank of 1,000 questions divided into 50 discrete levels of difficulty, the computer randomly selects a question at about Level 25, or halfway up the scale. If the student answers it right, the next question comes from a higher level, say, Level 27. If the student answers the first question wrong, the second question comes from a lower, easier level, say, Level 22. In this way -- up two or three levels when right, down two or three when wrong -- the student rapidly begins to encounter questions at her own level of proficiency. Once there, the computer presents the student three or four more questions at, above, and below that level to verify it. In about 30 minutes the test is done. Moreover, feedback in terms of final placement is instantaneous: each student gets a printout of her test results on the spot. The advantages? First, a 2/3 saving in time, on the average. Second, each test is virtually unique, so there is no problem with test security or cheating. Third, there are no expensive printing, collating, and stapling, distribution, nor storage costs for paper copies of the test. There is no waiting nor additional expense for papers to be graded. And electronic recording of test results and of student demographic data mean improved capacity for studies of performance and for report generation. This is a good illustration of something said by Dr. Ray Clifford, Provost of the Defense Language Institute at Monterey, CA: computers will not replace

language teachers, but language teachers who can use computers effectively will replace language teachers who cannot.

Computers are only one aspect of the technology that is changing language teachers' lives. There's also satellite TV. Schools and colleges all over the country are downlinking satellite TV programs from abroad for use in language instruction. In some schools *the students* operate the equipment to downlink European TV programs on a regular weekly schedule, videotape them, and deliver the tapes to the language teachers for use in classes the next Monday. (At Ohio State, we also make an audiotape of some of these same videotapes so the students can listen to the sound track at home or on their way to campus.)

Another exciting development is the linkup between computers and TV, i.e., interactive video, using videodisc technology to provide instant access to any part of as much as a half-hour of programming. Thus, for example, a student can be watching a documentary or an episode from a film in the target language; then there is a freeze, and the computer asks a comprehension question. The question may appear on the screen or be presented aurally, through the headphones. The student can then select an answer from those displayed before (or read to) him. If he answers correctly, the action resumes; if he answers wrong, the program might branch instantly back to the portion of the program where the information necessary to answer that item was shown. Then the action might resume, or, at the student's option, might present an explanation or a few more questions of that same type. If the instructor wishes, complete data about the time the student spent using the program, the questions he encountered, and the answers given (both right and wrong), can all be recorded silently, automatically, and printed out for analysis at a later time.

In another example, schools participating in the Russian Listening Comprehension Exercise Network [LCEN] during 1988/89 downlink (record) the Soviet evening news broadcast *Vremya* from a Soviet satellite every other Monday. Professor Richard Robin at George Washington University also records the broadcast and immediately writes listening comprehension exercises keyed to that broadcast. He then uploads the exercises to two national computer networks, BITNET and CompuServe, within 48 hours of the broadcast, and participating teachers download the exercises from there and use them as they wish. Every two weeks participating schools record a fresh videotaped newscast direct from Moscow, and within 48 hours of that newscast receive a fresh set of listening comprehension exercises keyed to it.

Another possibility for using technology to advance language teaching has been introduced with the advent of "fax phones." With inexpensive fax (facsimile) telephone terminals, we now can send and receive in minutes around the world, via normal telephone lines (even used at night, when the rates are lower), copies of documents of interest. A menu, a theater program, or a cartoon or an editorial from a paper in Madrid, Moscow, Munich, or Marseilles can be available to you easily, if you have someone (say, your counterpart in one of those cities, who might be a teacher of English) send it to you via fax phone. And you can reciprocate by sending her things that her class might be interested in.

Lest we begin to feel intimidated by this technological revolution, the probability is that the frontline classroom teacher will not have to know much about technology to use it effectively (just as you don't need to know how your car works to get a driver's license and go to school every day). For example:

> Consider the invention of the modern electric motor by Tesla nearly a century ago. People were fascinated by this development, and many people acquired electric motors simply as a curiosity. But the real growth of electric motors came as they were incorporated into all kinds of *other* machinery. No one says, "I'm going to buy a vacuum cleaner plus an electric motor" (or a washer or a food processor or a water pump or a typewriter). The motor is *taken for granted* when we acquire the machine or appliance that it runs. So it may well be with computers. By the time the millennium rolls around, the "free standing" home computer, sitting there on the kitchen table, may be as rare as the free-standing electric motor is today. But it is more than likely that each home will contain a dozen or more separate computers, built into the television, the burglar alarm, the car, the lighting system, the doorbell, the stove, and almost every other machine or gadget. [Emphasis added.]
>
> -- John Baer, *Computer Wimp*, p. 8

Thus, notwithstanding advances in computers, satellite communications, fax phones, interactive video, CD-ROM, electronic networks, and artificial intelligence, the element of human creativity in conceptualizing good research projects and instructional applications for all that technology is where the teacher comes in. We must not make the mistake we made with language labs: they were never a bad idea; but the language teaching profession expected too much of them and misused them dismally. Properly used for what it can do best, the new technology -- and indeed, the older language lab -- can be a valuable adjunct to our teaching. But we language teachers cannot expect hardware salesmen to do our jobs for us, the pedagogical application is up to us.

Authenticity

The third positive (and in some ways, most far-reaching) outcome of the past decade that will carry us into the 1990's is *authenticity*. At any conference where there are textbook and teaching material displays, we see the prominence given to *authentic* materials as teaching media. At the very time computers, satellites, and interactive video programs are delivering the world to our doorstep in a way and with an immediacy never before possible, the language teaching profession is beginning to take advantage of it all. This emphasis may be long overdue.

The key to the use of authentic materials is, "Simplify the task, not the text." Thus, printed and electronic materials prepared by native speakers for native speakers can be utilized in even the first week of classes, provided that what we ask our students to do with those materials is at a level appropriate to their skills. Simple activities, like finding the weather report in a newspaper (but not translating it) or the sports section; or guessing from a picture and a caption what a given article is about; or picking out from a telecast cognate words (like famous names or geographic references) can be utilized very early, and made more complex as our students' proficiency levels increase.

This is important not only linguistically. Most of us doubtless are aware of the rising tide of concern about mediocrity in general and world knowledge of American teenagers. (For example, the International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement reported recently that when students in 13 industrialized countries were tested for achievement in *science*, among 17-year-olds, Americans ranked ninth in physics, eleventh in chemistry, and dead last in biology. The National Geographic Society recently came out with a study that suggests that American teenagers are the most ignorant of *geography* of teenagers in any industrialized country in the world. As for *foreign languages*, we all know how monolingual most Americans are.)

Foreign language study can be content-free. Thus, as we teach foreign language, we can also teach a lot about the world, whether that be geography, ecology, science, the arts, or anything else that strikes us. We can and should teach much more than nouns and verbs in our language classes. And using authentic materials makes this kind of teaching not only easy, but nearly unavoidable.

As we move toward the use of authentic materials to teach not only language but also contemporary culture, are we leaving the Latin teachers behind? Indeed not; we're catching up to them. The good ones I know have always taught mini-courses in Western Civilization, educating the whole student, if you will.

Conclusion

Proficiency, Technology, and Authenticity represent the "PTA" of the future. At the beginning of the 1980's, little of this would likely have been predicted. After a confused '50's leading to a hectic '60's followed by the moribund '70's, foreign language education has spent most of the '80's coming back into its own. Now, happily, foreign language enrollments are back on their way up, conference attendance is increasing, and professionalism and participation are booming. Perhaps we could take a lesson from Catherine the Great. One of the most famous empresses of Russia, German by birth, she was given in marriage to a Russian prince who later became Tsar. She is rumored to have arranged his death to realize her own ambitions, and is supposed to have once said, "I shall be an autocrat, that's my trade. And the Good Lord will forgive me, that's his."

As Catherine perceived her challenge and did something about it, the challenge before us now may be to recognize and define our role, then get on with it.